

The Candidates: What's Wrong With the System?

By JAMES RESTON

The testimony of history is that the American political system works fairly well. Johnson, Kennedy, Eisenhower, Truman and Roosevelt may not all rank among the great American presidents, but compared with the postwar leaders of other leading nations, they rank quite high.

Nevertheless, this consoling thought is not enough to cover up the deep dissatisfaction in the nation today with the men the system has thrown up to the top in 1968. Not one of them expected a few years ago to find himself where he is in the Presidential race right now. All expected the system to bring new young leaders to the pinnacle and this has not happened, except perhaps in the case of the tragic Kennedys.

The Republican Puzzle

The case of the Republican party is a puzzle. Though a minority party, it must still command the allegiance of well over half the lawyers of the nation and maybe as much as two thirds of the remarkable company of world-minded business men who have emerged since the war.

It has suffered under the disadvantage of being out of power for 28 of the last 36 years, but even in the eight

Eisenhower years it did not find and develop an impressive young second team. In fact, the three most impressive Republicans to operate in the Washington executive in the last decade—Secretary of Defense McNamara, Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare Gardner, and White House aide McGeorge Bundy—were all ignored by Eisenhower and brought to Washington by the two Democratic Presidents, Kennedy and Johnson.

The Democrats

John Kennedy did make an effort to create a "ministry of talents," but not much grew up in the shade of Lyndon Johnson. He came to the White House with the reputation of a "master politician"—actually he was merely a master parliamentarian—but he did not attract or retain many brilliant young minds and clung mainly to the familiar and comfortable men of his own generation.

This is a subject that has attracted observers of the American political scene since deToqueville and Lord Bryce, who asked why our best men do not go into politics? Bryce thought in the nineteenth century that the attractions of commercial life in America were too great and the demands and penalties of political

life too severe, and this conclusion still stands today.

The cost of political campaigning, of course, is a factor, but it can be overcome. After all, the two men who are supposed to be leading the race—Nixon and Humphrey—started in politics with less cash than any of the others, with the possible exception of George Wallace, who is making a virtue out of his comparative poverty.

It may be that part of the explanation for our present plight is that we are not giving young men top Cabinet posts as we did in the very early days of the Republic. Johnson's and even Kennedy's cabinet was much older than Jefferson's, and today the Republicans are rejecting men like John Lindsay, Senator Mark Hatfield, and Senator Charles Percy as being too new and inexperienced.

The uncertainty and brutality of American politics, however, are probably the main reasons why so many talented men avoid the struggle. Even when they got close to the top, Nixon and Humphrey were not used in the Vice-Presidency to the full measure of their talents, and Humphrey now feels himself trapped by loyalty to the man who gave him the job.

The polls illustrate the uncertainty. Nixon was condemning them only a few days ago when they showed him running behind; now he is resting his case on Dr. Gallup's latest sample, which says he is running ahead.

The Violence

The preparation for the Democratic convention in Chicago explains a lot more. Fifteen thousand soldiers, police and Federal agents have been mobilized to protect the candidates and delegates, who will gather to vote under what is called a democratic system. Two Kennedys have been killed in the political tumult. President Johnson has withdrawn in the hope of stopping the demonstrations and unifying his party, and the demonstrations go on; and the outlook is for more until the final vote in November.

It is hard to believe, in the face of all this, that something is not deeply wrong with the system, despite all its achievements of the past. And if after all the dissenting criticism of the last few months, the result is a race between Nixon and Humphrey, the disenchantment of the young and the poor may make the problem of governing even more difficult than the problem of getting elected.